

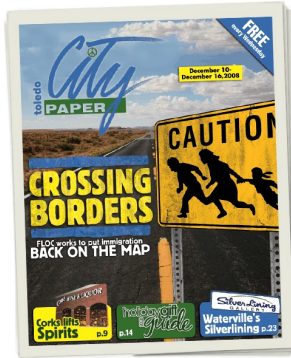
FLOC works to put immigrants back on the map

by Steve Steel

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Gottlieb Wilhelm came from hearty farming stock. His family earned a living from the marshy land along the southern shore of the North Sea in what was then German Prussia, near modern-day Gdansk. It was a difficult task in the short growing season. Gottlieb had dreams of a better life.

He decided to cast his lot to the West, in a land of fantastic promise and opportunity. Leaving the only life and land he had ever known, Gottlieb decided to trust in the legendary freedom of the land across the water. He gathered a few belongings, with little money, and immigrated to America.

Gottlieb traveled to the marshy area along the southern shore of Lake Erie and joined other German expatriates in clearing land and developing farming communities. Their small farms slowly flourished as they labored to straighten river channels, dig connecting ditches, and drain the Great Black Swamp. It was difficult, back numbing work, but done with a view of leaving giving the gift of prosperity for future generations.

Gottlieb's is a deeply personal story of decision and hope, not unlike that of many ancestral Americans. His journey was the start of an American Dream, leaving a Europe torn by wars, famines, and other hardships for the hope of a new beginning in the Land of the Free. He was my great, great grandfather.

Was he an immigrant? Or an illegal alien?

Breaking and entering

"Some of the most vociferous critics of modern-day immigration claim that undocumented workers are lawbreakers, and that allowing those with five or more years in this country to enter the process to legalize rewards them for breaking the law," said Baldemar Velasquez, President and founder of the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC). FLOC is an AFL-CIO union of migrant farmworkers, and has been at the forefront of the immigration debate for years.

"These critics like to say their ancestors did it the right way by hard work and honesty and that they didn't try to get ahead by breaking the law," continued Velasquez. "I say that this level of debate is disingenuous at best, since their forebears entered the country in the 19th and early 20th century. At that time there were so few restrictions that there was no such thing as illegal immigration. The public policy was actually an open amnesty."

Velasquez pointed to the Registry Act of 1929 as further evidence of a different perspective on the importance of immigrant rights. "In an attempt to identify undocumented workers, the Act allowed immigrants who arrived before 1921 but had no record of entry to register retroactively for a \$20 fee. From the mid 1930s to the 1950s, hundreds of thousands of Europeans unlawfully in the U.S. were allowed to go to Canada and reenter the U.S. as permanent residents. Most current immigrants would gladly take any such opportunity and also say they did it the 'right' way."

An Agreement disagreement

The current waves of immigration from nations to America's south bring workers seeking a better life, often because of American trade and foreign policy, according to Beatriz Maya, FLOC Secretary-Treasurer and long-time activist on immigration issues. "Numerous studies have shown how the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) devastated rural areas in Mexico by eliminating barriers to the import of intensively-produced corn into the Mexican market, destroying the livelihoods of thousands of peasants and small farmers," said Maya. "They were then forced to migrate in search of jobs and ended up on American farms and construction sites."

Velasquez cited one such study, illustrating the purported impact of NAFTA on immigration. "In 2002, the Carnegie Endowment issued a report that one of the net results of NAFTA had been the destruction of 1.3 million Mexican corn farms," he said. "Just in this one commodity, as NAFTA opened the door of the Mexican corn market to U.S. farmers, it was like sending the number one ranked football team out to play a startup team that had no pads or helmets. It was an absolute slaughter! How could Mexican farmers compete with farmers supported by one the largest agricultural farm subsidy programs in the world? Those Mexican farmers, if not currently seeking to survive in the urban slums and dump yards of Mexico, have made their way to the United States."

According to data provided by Maya, "over 70% of the migrant farm workers who pick our fruits and vegetables in the USA are undocumented immigrant workers, mainly those displaced by NAFTA in Mexico." The situation of these workers is often dire. "They earn meager wages, and work in one of America's hardest jobs that no American workers now want to perform," continued Maya. "They are not taking away any jobs, but, as any Ohio farmer could tell you, saving American farms by doing a job nobody else wants to do. And they don't even have a right to do that in a documented, legal way."

FLOC expects that the recent Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) will have a similar impact. Other US policies in Central and South America have already contributed to the immigrant stream, including support of brutal dictatorships in places like Guatemala and Honduras and the "War on Drugs" in Colombia and Bolivia.

"The so-called 'anti-drug wars' in South America are funding the military to do things that have little to do with a war on drugs," alleged Maya. "They spray fields where coca is supposedly grown. The effect has been the killing of productive crops, without providing alternatives to small farmers."

Finding a decent proposal

A variety of measures to alleviate immigration pressures have been proposed over the past few years. According to FLOC, some are merely for the continued benefit of large corporations while others are wrong-headedly xenophobic. More extreme measures include workplace raids and deportations which split immigrant families, often using local law enforcement agencies or even BMVs, which have no immigration experience, to act as de facto arms of the Federal government. The most extreme proposal has been a wall running along the entire southern US border.

Maya contends such extreme measures are not supported by the majority of Americans. "An analysis done by America's Voice of twenty-one races for congressional seats in the recent national election found that pro-immigrant candidates beat enforcement-only promoters in nineteen," she noted.

A proposal by the Bush Administration suggested an expanded "guestworker" program. Such programs reconcile the need for an immigrant work force with immigration limitations by allowing specific growers and companies to recruit immigrant labor for specified time periods. Workers are tied to specific employers and are expected to leave the country if dismissed.

Velazquez said these proposals remain suspect. “The ‘guest worker programs’ have historically been riddled with corruption and extortion,” he said, “with workers subjected to blacklisting and forms of retaliation” if they complain about conditions or attempt to join a union. In addition, according to Velasquez’ congressional testimony on the program, attempts to put the burden of the economics of such programs on small growers rather than processing corporations make it more profitable for growers to continue to use undocumented workers, whose fear of deportation makes them compliant and exploitable.

Urbano’s story

FLOC has documented the plight of dozens of such workers, but one such case is illustrative. Urbano Ramirez was born in a small Indian community in the mountains of Guerrero, México. At 34, he was trying to support his family as a carpenter and construction worker. He told others that he wanted his children to get a good education and have a better life than he had known. So in May of 2001, Urbano left his familiar surroundings, and headed north to find a way to support his family.

When he joined relatives in North Carolina, Urbano had great difficulty finding work, so he decided to go into the fields. His relatives and friends warned him that field work was low-paying, hard, and dangerous, but he felt he had no other choice. So he worked in the fields processing crops to ensure that food would be on the tables of Americans across the country.

According to a FLOC investigation, Urbano was picking cucumbers in a field on June 26 at Jake Taylor Farms in North Carolina. He felt dizzy and nauseous — signs of a heat stroke. The field supervisor told him to rest under a tree, while the crew moved on to a tobacco field. When the workers were loaded onto a bus to go back to the migrant labor camp, the supervisor forgot about Urbano.

When Urbano’s relatives and friends didn’t hear from him, they went to the migrant camp looking for him. The field supervisor told them that he had left the farm. When they still couldn’t find Urbano, they went back to the camp demanding to know where he was. The local sheriff was called, who handcuffed Urbano’s brother, yet didn’t even talk with Urbano’s co-workers to learn more about the complaint.

Two months after Urbano had arrived in the U.S and nine days after being reported missing, co-workers walked the several miles back to the same fields, and found Urbano’s decomposing body under the same tree. He was identified by papers in his pockets and the tokens given for picking cucumbers.

Who benefits from a system of this sort? Velasquez was quick with an answer. “Corporations such as RJ Reynolds,” he said, “one of the biggest producers of tobacco in the world, which sets all the standards, guidelines, and quality control for a procurement empire that stretches the globe. It is because of this reason that FLOC initiated a campaign for union recognition for R.J. Reynolds tobacco harvesters. Reynolds needs to hear from those at the bottom of their supply chain, particularly the tobacco cutters that do the stoop labor and whatever it takes to survive in order for the company to sell its product. FLOC is asking R.J. Reynolds for that recognition and that they reconsider the dignity of those who make up their supply line and their procurement system.”

Sweet Freedom

As an alternative to undocumented or “guest worker” status, Velasquez and FLOC argue for a Freedom Visa with trading partners, like signatories to NAFTA and CAFTA. “A good pilot effort could be attempted with the NAFTA countries (USA, Mexico, and Canada) for starters. The Freedom Visa would guarantee the freedom to travel and to work with labor rights. It should be tied to verified employment but not to an individual employer; in other words, it would be a portable visa. It should be tied to basic freedoms like the right of association and the right to form organizations and unions to protect their labor rights. This would mitigate violations of labor standards and prevailing wages by allowing these workers to be organizable.”

Safeguards like a Freedom Visa would mitigate the inevitable result of Free Trade agreements, according to Velasquez. "The integration of economies, especially those that exist adjacent to us, will not avoid hardship on some, but we cannot frustrate human nature and the will to survive by imposing impediments on the desire for honest work to support one's families anywhere it can be found."

Looking for change

Recent economic upheavals have pushed immigration policy to the background, but according to Maya, FLOC "remains hopeful of new policy directions from the Obama Administration," even as she expressed concern about "the recycling of members from the Clinton Administration into the new government."

"Clinton policies in the immigration arena failed and led us to our current situation," she said, pointing to the ratification of NAFTA in 1993 and the restrictive Immigration and Nationality Act of 1996. "We are concerned about the appointment of the Janet Napolitano, Governor of Arizona, as the new head of Homeland Security, and we are eager to hear his foreign policy in this area."

"There is much the new government could immediately prioritize," she continued. "This includes supporting the passage of a bipartisan 'Ag Jobs' bill that seeks to legalize the much needed agricultural labor force. Family-based visas should be extended and the backlog of currently approved family members in foreign countries waiting to be reunited should be eliminated. Last, the Obama Administration should work on a comprehensive bill that would reduce or eliminate the causes of migration, including renegotiating NAFTA and supporting rural development in areas of Mexico and Central and South America."

On the local front, FLOC has worked to oppose Ohio SB-260, which sought to allow county sheriffs to assist federal immigration agents. "We were concerned the bill would affect the trust between the community and the police and the ability of Latinos in particular to report crimes," explained Maya. "It was an unfunded mandate which would have adversely affected the finances of Lucas County," she continued. "And it could increase the profiling of Latinos and other people of color. There are several studies on counties that implemented these types of arrangements showing such negative consequences."

Maya noted that FLOC organized a community forum last August, with Lucas County Sheriff James Telb and some of his top staff in attendance. "We presented an 'Initiative for Safe Communities,' now under consideration by the Sheriff's office," she said.

Maya remains hopeful that immigration issues can reach a positive resolution under a new administration.

"The American people want concrete solutions that can benefit all workers, respect everyone's human rights and continue the tradition of America as a Nation of Immigrants."

Immigrants like Urbano Ramirez. And Gottlieb Wilhelm.